A BRIEF HISTORY

A later comer in the European race for possessions and profits in the New World, Denmark took possession of the West Indian islands of St. Thomas in 1671 and St. John in 1717. Desiring more suitable land for sugar cultivation, the Danes purchased St. Croix from France in 1733. Danish efforts to settle the island would prove successful, but were initially delayed for a year following the devastating 1733 slave revolt on St. John.

The location for the first Danish settlement on St. Croix, on the island's northeast coast, was chosen because of existence of an adequate harbor for commercial shipping. At that site, the Danes found and built upon the ruins of a French village called **Bassin,** which dated from the second half of the 1600s. The new town, named Christiansted in honor of king Christian VI of Denmark-Norway, was envisioned to rival Christiania (Olso), Norway, at least in size, Christiansted was laid out according to the grid system, and benefited from several building codes that were quite progressive for their time. The earliest of these (1747) regulated street width, easement, construction materials, and commercial and residential zoning.

St. Croix's economy stagnated while the island was administered by the Danish West India and Guinea Company from 1734 to 1754. This was Denmark's royally chartered slave-trading monopoly. The Company overburdened planters and merchants with excessive taxes on imports and exports and the requirement that all trade be carried in Danish vessels. Conditions improved when the "Danish Islands in America" because a crown colony in 1755, following the crown's purchase of the Company's stocks. The royal governor-general took up residence at the new capital, Christiansted. For two hundred years, the town's destiny was inextricably tied to the fortunes of St. Croix's sugar industry on the European and American markets.

Between 1760 and 1800, as the result of free-trade policies, St. Croix's population increased dramatically, and great profits were realized from the production of sugar, molasses, rum, and cotton. This period became known as "the Golden Age of St. Croix". However, the development of the beet sugar industry in Europe, a sharp drop in the price of sugar cane beginning in 1820, the loss of free labor with the emancipation of the slaves in 1848, and a series of hurricanes and drought all contributed to an irreversible economic decline.

Christiansted's architectural maturation spanned a hundred years, blending Neo-classical government buildings and townhouses, gothic revival churches, shop-residence combinations, and shingled wooden cottages.

Christiansted's status as capital of the Danish West Indies ended in 1871, when a futile attempt was made to placate inter-island rivalries by transferring the seat of government between St. Croix and St. Thomas every six months. This ambiguity was resolved in St. Thomas's favor in 1917, when the United States purchased the Danish West Indies for strategic naval purpose during World War 1.

Today, through the variety and remarkable number of its 18th and 19th century buildings, Christiansted offers visitors and residents alike a picturesque reminder of a West Indian colonial capital built "when sugar was king."

AN INTERNATIONAL PORT

The wharf area of Christiansted once played an important role in a mercantile system that linked Europe, West Africa, the West Indies, and North America. Here the paths of ships captains, merchants, planters, and slave crossed briefly, often impersonally, Especially between 1760 and 1820, wealth derived from sugar and slaves enabled an extravagant – almost legendary – life style among the upper class of St. Croix society.

From 1734 until the cessation of Danish slaving in 1803, Christiansted was an integral part of the infamous Triangular Trade. Slaves were acquired for trinkets at “factories”, or slaving forts, along the Guinea Coast of West Africa. In route to the West Indies via the inhuman “Middle Passage,” slaves and crew alike faced starvation, disease, and shipwreck. At Christiansted, [the compound], and the ships’ cargoes replenished with sugar, rum, molasses, cotton, and tropical hardwoods for the return voyage to Europe.

By the mid-1700s, Christiansted was also involved in a lively trade with both Europe and North America. Large mercantile house in Scandinavia and the Mid-Atlantic colonies were represented here by brothers, sons, or partners. Commercial interests were often cemented by marriages with prominent St. Croix families. Building materials, agricultural supplies, household furnishings, livestock, and foodstuffs were imported to help St. Croix meet the needs of its vigorous plantation economy. The international demand for the products of the local sugar industry balanced the flow of cash through exports.

St. Croix’s access to foreign markets was temporarily interrupted by two British occupations during the Napoleon War (1801 and 1807-1815). With the resumption of international trade in 1815, the United States market increased consuming at least 75% of St. Croix’s agricultural exports by 1830. The transfer of the Danish West Indies to the Untied States in 1917 only served to formalize and economic relationship that had long existed between the Virgin Islands and the mainland.

THE URBAN PROFESSIONAL AND TRADESMAN

Urban professionals and trade people at Christiansted provided a wide range of service vital to the needs of residents and commercial interests alike.

The white population of Christiansted consisted of Scandinavians, British, Germans, Dutch, Americans, Irish, and French. Urban occupations were as varied as class and national origin: government officials, clergy, merchants, soldiers, sailors, watchmakers, tailors, shoemakers, masons, blacksmiths, carpenters, and fisherman. Of these inhabitants, the Moravian missionary C. G. A. Oldendorp wrote in 1766, “in the very mixed society, the basic distinctions... are those of social standing, income, professional know-how, morality, and other factors considered important in a class society.

Black also, from the start, played a highly significant role in the economic and architectural development of Christiansted. Slaves were indispensable for the “muscle” they provided in construction and the loading and unloading of cargoes. Free Blacks practiced many of the same trades as the whites, and were especially skilled builders. Their special status allowed them to form their own company of militia, which helped the government hunt runaway slaves.

The remarkably diverse ethnic and national composition of Christiansted’s inhabitants proved to be a true “melting pot,” whose skills and cultural values were shared, absorbed and adapted without partiality. Christiansted past and present is a mirror of that experience.

HISTORIC STRUCTURES

Fort Christiansvaern: The best-preserved Danish fort in the Virgin Islands. Fort Christiansvaern's design (although modified for the tropics) is typical of 17th century European military architecture. Like many other buildings in Christiansted it was constructed primarily of yellow bricks brought from Denmark as ballast in sailing ships. The fort was essentially completed by 1749, with the last major additions dating from 1835 – 1841. Fort Christiansvaern protected shipping from attacks by pirates and privateers, enforced the collection of custom duties, and quartered Danish troops primarily responsible for internal security. After 1878, the fort was used as a police station and courthouse. The National Park Service has restored the Fort to its appearance as a military establishment ca. 1830-1855.

Steeple Building: The Church of our Lord God of Sabaoth, St. Croix's first Lutheran Church, was completed in 1753. The steeple was added between 1749-1796. In 1831, the congregation moved to a new location on King and Queen Cross Street rather than undertake costly repairs. The building, taken over by the Danish State, was subsequently used as a military bakery, hospital, and school. The Steeple Building, as it is popularly known, has been restored to its appearance ca. 1800. It now serves as the historic site principal museum.

Danish West India & Guinea Company Warehouse: The Company completed this building in 1749. During the 1700s, the entire complex was three times its present size, encompassing storerooms, offices, lodgings for personnel, and the slave auctions yard. After 1833, the Danish military used it as a supply deport. It served as a telegraph office in 1900.

Danish Custom House: The colonial government carries out the collection of customs revenues or duties here. Part of the first floor dates to 1751, when it comprised a small outbuilding in the Danish West India & Guinea Company's compound. The existing structure was completed in 1830. Until 1927, the Custom Service was located on the ground level, with the post office situated on the second floor. Today it serves as headquarters for the historic site.

Scale House: Imports and exports were weighed and inspected at this facility. Storage space and an office for the weigh master shared the first floor. Quarters for the soldiers attached to the Custom House were located upstairs. Completed in 1856, this structure replaced a wooden building dating from the 1750.

Government House: This "palace" originally consisted of two town houses. The central wing dates from 1747. It served as the residence for Johan Wilhelm Schopen – merchant, surveyor, and inspector of buildings – until it was purchased as the residence of the governors-general in 1771. The adjacent building was completed in 1797 for the merchant and planter Adam Sobotker. Governor-General Peter Von Scholten, who had the two structures joined and acquired it for the government in the early 1830s. The reception hall and ballroom on the second floor, now restored to its appearance in the 1840s, is the only part of the building usually open to the public. The buildings are currently owned and operated by the Government of the Virgin Islands.

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